COMS 356: Introduction to Behavioral Research Methods in Communication

Autumn 2025

Professor:	Dr. Yue Li, li.yue@ku.edu
Graduate Teaching Assistant:	Wenrong (Casper) Cui, wenrongcui@ku.edu
Class Info:	MW 1:00pm – 1:50pm CT, Blake Hall, 109 Lab meetings on Fridays, see your individual schedule
Office hours on Mondays, Tuesdays, & by appointment:	Dr. Li will be available in her office (Bailey 6C) from 12:00pm – 1:00pm on Mondays and Wednesdays and by appointment Wenrong (Casper) Cui will be available in his office (Bailey 5B) from 10:00am-11:30am on Tuesdays and Thursdays and by appointment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

Welcome to COMS 356! This course will challenge you to evaluate and use communication research methods. Research is used for many important reasons. It's used to test the effectiveness of vaccines and understand public opinion, but also often misused to sell products and spread misinformation. This class covers best practices in research methods, particularly those related to communication studies, so that students can be smarter consumers of the research they encounter. The course is hands-on, taking the approach that the best way to learn to evaluate research is to practice research techniques yourself. In this course, you will learn why it is important to conduct systematic research, the art and science of measuring complex concepts, when to use various methods (e.g., surveys, experiments, content analyses), and how to interpret basic quantitative data. In addition to helping you better evaluate research, the course also prepares you for upper-division classes in the COMS department and is excellent preparation for graduate school work. This hands-on course will provide an opportunity to learn, critique, and practice important research techniques.

COURSE DESCRIPTION (FROM COURSE CATALOG)

An introduction to the nature of theory and theory building in the study of human communication. Research methods include experimentation, survey, content analysis, and field description. An introduction to statistics and statistical tests is included as well. Prerequisite: MATH 101 and admission to the Communication Studies major or consent of instructor.

INSTRUCTIONAL MODE AND CREDIT HOURS

This is an in-person course that fulfills 3 credit hours; Consistent with KU policy and the federal definition of a credit hour, this means you should expect to spend at least 9 hours a week on this course over the 15 week semester.

COURSE LEARNING OUTCOMES

By the end of the semester, students should be able to:

- Understand academic and public research reports
- Evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of study designs
- Conduct introductory data analysis
- Compile an introductory research report

READINGS

There is one recommended textbook for the course: Treadwell, D., & Davis, A. (2019). *Introducing communication research: Paths of inquiry*. 4th ed. Los Angeles: Sage.

GRADING

All grades will be posted to Canvas. Grades will be weighted and computed based on the following assignments:

Lecture Activities	5%
Lab Assignments	20%
Exams (2 x 20%)	40%
Project Assignments (3 x 5%)	15%
Final Research Report	20%

This course uses a plus/minus grading system:

A	92.5-100%	C+	76.5-79.49%	D+	66.5-69.49%
A-	89.5-92.49%	C	72.5-76.49%	D	62.5-66.49%
B+	86.5-89.49%	C-	69.5-72.49%	D-	59.5-62.49%
B	82.5-86.49%			F	0-59.49%
B-	79.5-82.49%				

Grade Consultations. Consultations about grades are welcome in order to clarify course standards and procedures and to provide guidance that might improve future performance. Students must wait 24 hours after a grade is posted to discuss a grade with us and have 7 business days after a grade has been assigned to contest a grade. This must be done in writing. After 7 business days, all grades are considered final. Assigned grades will not be changed unless clear and significant procedural errors have occurred.

Student Survey of Teaching. Suggestions and constructive criticism are encouraged throughout the course. Students will be asked to complete an end-of-semester, online Student Survey of Teaching, which could inform modifications to this course (and other courses that we teach) in the future.

COURSE ASSIGNMENTS AND REQUIREMENTS

In-Class Lecture Activities (5%). During lecture meetings on some Mondays and Wednesdays, students will participate in class activities designed to review content, check in with student questions, practice answering exam questions, etc. Student answers need not be correct to earn credit for these activities; instead, students will earn half credit for each activity simply for attending lecture and full credit for attending lecture *and* putting forth a good faith effort in participating (that is, at least making a guess, showing that they are trying to understand the course material). The exact days on which activities will occur and the number of activities will depend on the pace of the class lecture. Students must be in class to earn credit for these assignments, but we will drop students' two lowest grades. Because we are dropping students' lowest grades, no outside-of-class make-up assignments will be accepted barring an official university excused absence (with documentation).

In-Class Lab Assignments (20%). In Friday lab meetings throughout the semester, students will complete a series of lab assignments designed to help students practice using and evaluating the skills covered in lecture. The lectures prior to each of these labs will prepare students for these assignments. Other than attending lecture and reviewing lecture material, no work for these lab assignments is required outside of typical class time. There are eight research labs scheduled during the semester, and we will drop students' two lowest grades so that the scores of six lab assignments will be averaged to make up the final in-class lab assignments grade. Students must attend their lab section in person and complete the lab assignment by the end of the class period in which it was assigned to earn credit for a lab assignment. Because we are dropping students' lowest grades, no outside-of-class make-up assignments will be accepted barring an official university excused absence (with official documentation). Lab assignments must be made up in-person with a graduate teaching assistant.

Exams (40%). Students will take two in-class exams, each worth 20% of the final letter grade. The exams will assess whether students can apply the basic ideas covered in class. They will include a mix of multiple choice, true/false, and short answer questions that challenge students to apply the concepts discussed in class. Importantly, these will build on skills practiced in the lab assignments, so students can think of the lab assignments as a review and practice

for the exams. The first exam will cover the material from the first half of the semester, and the second exam will cover the material from the second half of the semester.

Students have an opportunity to replace one exam grade with the grade of an optional cumulative exam conducted during Finals Week. This assignment will be most helpful for students who (a) would like to potentially improve one of their exam grades, (b) miss an exam for reasons not covered by a University Excused Absence (e.g., a vacation), or (c) cannot provide verification that the reason they miss an exam is due to a University Excused Absence.

Research Project. Students will work with a partner to analyze publicly available survey data and write a research report explaining the findings. The research project will be completed in stages:

- Project Assignments (15%): During the final half of the semester, students will complete three assignments that build toward the final research project report (described below). We will provide a few potential project topics and students will choose one of those topics to research. The first assignment will be an introduction and brief methods overview. The second assignment will include a numerical and visual description of the provided data. The third assignment will include basic statistical tests of the relationships in the data. Students will have some class time during Friday lab meetings to work on these assignments with the help of their GTA, though there will not be enough to time complete the assignments in class. These assignments will be uploaded to Canvas, and students should pay careful attention to the time/date deadlines for each assignment.
- Final Research Report (20%): For the final research report, students will revise, aggregate, and add to the three project assignments to create a final research report that consists of introduction, methods, findings, and limitations/conclusions sections. Most of the content of this final research report will be revisions of the three project assignments. Examples of the final research report will be provided to the class prior to the due date. The final project must be uploaded to Canvas by the end of the day on Monday, Dec 8.

COURSE POLICIES AND UNIVERSITY RESOURCES

Attendance.

- Lecture Attendance. Attendance in lecture is necessary for learning and for practice applying the course material; therefore, your attendance is highly recommended for your success in this course. We use lecture time to explain and apply course concepts. A notes outline for each class/topic is posted to Canvas, but class slides and videos of lectures are not. Additionally, lecture activities may only be completed for credit in class. Thus, we strongly encourage students to attend lectures.
- Lab Section Attendance. While attendance is not, in itself, part of students' lab section grades, lab activities may only be completed in class, and students will be able to work on project assignments with the help of GTAs during their lab sections. Thus, attendance is necessary on Fridays.
- What to do if you miss class. We have built flexibility into the course schedule. We will drop each student's lowest two lecture activity grades and lowest two lab assignment grades, and students have the opportunity to complete an optional make-up exam to replace their lowest exam grade. These dropped grades are meant to be used for emergencies. It is important to keep in mind that we do not allow make-ups for in-class exams and assignments without a verified university excused absence, so additional missing assignments beyond these will impact student grades. If a student misses class, they are encouraged to view the notes handout posted to Canvas, to reach out to a fellow classmate for notes on the missed class, and, then, to reach out to their GTA or Dr. Li to help answer any remaining questions. Also, we are giving 5% extra credit on students' first lab assignment if they read the syllabus. To earn this extra credit, email the GTA of your lab section by 8:00am on Friday, August 22 (see email addresses at the top of this syllabus) and include a picture that tells your GTA and classmates something fun about you (e.g., image of you with your pet or siblings, your favorite book/movie/tv show/artist/etc., a favorite spot in your hometown, or anything else you are comfortable sharing with the class). If an illness or other emergency will lead to a long term absence (that is, longer than 2 weeks), students are encouraged to reach out to Dr. Li and their

GTA as quickly as possible to determine the best course of action, as well as the Student Support and Case Management Office, and/or the Student Access Center.

Late Work. Students are expected to complete the exams and assignments on the dates listed in the schedule. We do not schedule make-up exams or in-class lab assignments except for university excused absences. Research project assignments are accepted up to 24-hours late but will incur a letter grade (10%) deduction. No research project assignments will be accepted more than 24 hours late.

University Excused Absences. A University Excused Absence is one for which a student cannot be penalized and shall receive an accommodation for completing the missed work. These absences include religious observances, required military service, illness or injury, personal verifiable mental health or medical crisis or that of a relative or friend, unforeseen life event or compelling circumstances beyond the student's control (divorce, birth or adoption of a child, death, loss of employment, sexual assault, domestic violence), academic field trips, participation in university activities at the request of university authorities, jury duty or officially mandated court appearances, and professional association or conference presentation. The full University Excused Absence policy is available here.

As noted in the University policy, instructors may ask students to provide documentation to verify that an event qualifies as a University Excused Absence. We accept documentation that clearly includes the name of the student or close family member/friend and a date/timestamp to demonstrate that the absence on a given date fits one of the categories covered by the University Excused Absence policy. We completely understand if students do not want to provide the documentation with details about their situation directly to us, since documents can include very personal information. Thus we encourage students to provide documentation to the Student Support and Case Management Office and/or the Student Access Center who can work with the student to verify the information and simply let us (and other the student's other instructors) know that the situation on certain dates has been verified.

There are many understandable reasons for a student to miss class that do not fit into a category of verifiable University Excused Absences. If a student is feeling sick but not ill enough to go to the doctor, a clinic only provides a letter saying that student visited but not that the student was actually sick, a student needs a personal day or needs to take time to visit office hours for another class, and/or if a student cannot otherwise verifiably document that their absence was a University Excused Absence, the flexible scheduling we provide in the class still applies. That is, students can complete the optional make-up exam to replace a missed exam and take advantage of the dropped lecture and lab assignments grades.

In sum, please stay home if you are sick or need a personal day. That is totally fine! This is exactly why we have built flexibility into the syllabus. In fact, we will apply the dropped grades before offering make-up assignments on the third excused absence. We will only provide make-up exams and activities to students who can document their University Excused Absences.

Email Etiquette. I encourage students to email with any questions they have throughout the semester. We try to respond within 48 hours during the week and by Monday evening if students email over the weekend. If we have not responded in that time frame, please feel free to email again. Please keep three things in mind:

- Check the syllabus and all course handouts before emailing. If an answer is in the course documents, we will direct students back to those documents.
- We encourage students to explain their reasons clearly and respectfully for emailing. Be sure to address the email professionally (e.g. "Hello Dr. Li"), remind us of your name, demonstrate that you have read the syllabus/class handouts, and then explain your question or request. For more detailed guidelines see the article at this link (the tone is quite snarky, but the suggestions are good!).
- Finally, if you have a question for us, current event to share, want to schedule an appointment to meet outside of office hours, etc., please use email rather than sending a message through Canvas.

Canvas. This course uses Canvas as a space to post course readings, assignments, grades, and course announcements. Students should check Canvas regularly and turn on announcement notifications to ensure that they are up to date on course material. Please see the following for more information: http://canvas.ku.edu

Seeking assistance. Students should not hesitate to seek assistance. Assistance is best sought before, rather than after, assignments are due. Much of the material covered in this class is based upon social science research. Students will be required to think and write in ways that may be unfamiliar. Training in advanced methods is not required, but some may feel apprehensive about their understanding of course material. If something in class or the readings is unclear, please don't hesitate to ask questions in class or to schedule an office hours visit.

Conduct in class. We want to build a classroom climate that is comfortable for everyone. It is especially important that everyone (1) displays respect for all members of the classroom, including the instructor and other students; (2) pays attention to and participates in all class sessions and activities; and (3) avoids racist, sexist, homophobic, or other divisive language that may unnecessarily exclude members of our campus and classroom. Specifically, be sure to:

- Only use technology when its use is in service of the course content
- Be on time to class to avoid causing a distraction
- Avoid unnecessary disruption during class time (e.g., having private conversations, using social media, doing work for other classes, making/receiving phone calls or texts except in emergencies, etc.)

Violation of any of these guidelines will result in a warning to the student. If the conduct continues, the student will be asked to leave class.

Academic Misconduct. For the assignments in this course, students will be required to produce original work and support their arguments using other researchers' work as a foundation. These assignments must be original, must not use online AI programs (see more below), and must acknowledge all sources (including those covered in class). Using any material that was written by someone else and submitting as though it was your own is unacceptable, even if it is accidental. Students also are not permitted to submit the same work to multiple courses. Work submitted should represent students' original work created specifically for this class. Students who violate University rules on academic integrity are subject to disciplinary penalties, including the possibility of failure in this course and/or dismissal from the University. For more information, please see KU's Writing Center for details about crediting sources, and KU's academic misconduct policy and procedures.

Use of AI. While artificial intelligence, including ChatGPT, can be a helpful resource during the initial phases of brainstorming, it does not substitute for credible research or original content creation. College is designed to help students build the critical thinking skills and content knowledge that will allow them to determine whether information they encounter is likely accurate. Further, learning how to conduct literature searches, spot biases that may be present in AI algorithms, and build writing skills is essential for academic research. ChatGPT even provides the following statement to users: "ChatGPT may produce inaccurate information about people, places, or facts." Thus, all formal assignments in this class (e.g., activities, papers, exams, presentations) should be 100% original student work. Note that TurnItIn flags AI-generated papers, and student work that includes such language is subject to the Academic Misconduct policy detailed above.

Accommodations. The Student Access Center (SAC) coordinates academic accommodations and services for all eligible KU students with disabilities. If you have a disability for which you wish to request accommodations and have not contacted SAC, please do so as soon as possible. They are located in 22 Strong Hall and can be reached at 785-864-4064 (V/TTY). Information about their services can be found at www.access.ku.edu. Please contact me privately about your needs in this course.

Recording and Intellectual Property. Course materials prepared by the instructor, together with the content of all lectures, activities, and review sessions presented by the instructor are the property of the instructor. Video and audio recording of lectures and review sessions without the consent of the instructor is prohibited. On request, the instructor may grant permission for students to audio record lectures, on the condition that these audio recordings are only used as a study aid by the individual making the recording and must not be shared, sold, or published publicly. Unless explicit permission is obtained from the instructor, recordings of lectures and review sessions may not be modified and must not be transferred or transmitted to any other person, audience, or entity in any form.

Commercial Note Taking. Pursuant to the University of Kansas' commercial note-taking policy, commercial note taking is not permitted. Lecture notes and course materials may be taken for personal use, for the purpose of mastering the course material, and may not be sold to any person or entity in any form (though of course feel free to share notes with other students currently enrolled in the course!). Any student engaged in or contributing to the commercial exchange of notes or course materials will be subject to discipline, including academic misconduct charges, in accordance with University policy. Note taking provided by a student volunteer for a student with a disability, as a reasonable accommodation under the ADA, is not the same as commercial note-taking and is not covered under this policy.

Additional Resource and Policy Information for Students. The University of Kansas has a variety of resources to support your success on campus. In addition to the links below, visit the Student Resources website (KU Student Affairs) for additional policies and resources.

- Change of Grade Policy and USRR, Section 3: Change of Grade
- Code of Student Rights and Responsibilities
- KU Policy on Commercial Notetaking
- KU Statement on Diversity and Inclusion
- Mandatory Reporting (Civil Rights & Title IX)
- Nondiscrimination, Equal Opportunity, and Affirmative Action
- Racial and Ethnic Harassment Policy
- Sexual Harassment
- KU weapons policy
- Counseling and Psychological Services
- Kansas Board of Regents Statement on Freedom of Expression
- Student Support and Case Management
- All Gender Restroom List

Syllabus and Course Schedule Changes. The syllabus and course schedule are subject to change with sufficient notice to students.

Class Schedule

Date	Lecture	Lab Topic	Assignment Due
Aug 18 Monday	Course Introduction		
Aug 20 Wednesday	Why we need systematic research Recommended: T&D p. 6 – 17, p. 24 – 28		
Aug 22 Friday		Introductions	
Aug 25 Monday	How we can approach research Recommended: T&D p. 6 – 17, p. 24 – 28		
Aug 27 Wednesday	How to find, evaluate, and summarize prior research Recommended: T&D Ch. 4, p. 32 – 35		
Aug 29 Friday		Lab assignment	*In-Class Lab #1*
Sep 1 Monday	*Labor Day Holiday – No Class*		
Sep 3 Wednesday	How to evaluate and conduct ethical research Recommended: T&D Ch. 3		
Sep 5 Friday		Lab assignment	*In-Class Lab #2*
Sep 8 Monday	How to evaluate and conduct ethical research		
Sep 10 Wednesday	Asking questions and making predictions Recommended: T&D p. 30		
Sep 12 Friday		Lab assignment	*In-Class Lab #3*
Sep 15 Monday	Asking questions and making predictions		
Sep 17 Wednesday	How to turn concepts into numbers Recommended: T&D p. 30–32, 92–96, 101–104, 183–189		
Sep 19 Friday		Lab assignment	*In-Class Lab #4*
Sep 22 Monday	How to turn concepts into numbers		
Sep 24 Wednesday	How to turn concepts into numbers		
Sep 26 Friday		Lab assignment	*In-Class Lab #5*
Sep 29 Monday	How to evaluate and conduct a survey Recommended: T&D p. 177–183, 189–192		
Oct 1 Wednesday	How to evaluate and conduct an experiment Recommended: T&D Ch. 10		
Oct 3 Friday		Lab assignment	*In-Class Lab #6*
Oct 6 Monday	How to evaluate and conduct an experiment		
Oct 8 Wednesday	Exam #1		
Oct 10 Friday		No Lab Meeting	
Oct 11 through 14 – Fall Break – No Class			
Oct 15 Wednesday	How to evaluate and conduct a content analysis Recommended: T&D Ch. 11		

Class Schedule

Date	Lecture	Lab Topic	Assignment Due
Oct 17 Friday		Introduce & Work on Project Assignment #1	
Oct 20 Monday	How to choose the best research method for a question		
Oct 22 Wednesday	How to evaluate and construct a sample Recommended: T&D Ch. 6		
Oct 24 Friday		Lab assignment	*In-Class #7*
Oct 27 Monday	How to evaluate and construct a sample		
Oct 29 Wednesday	How to describe data numerically and visually Recommended: T&D p. 131–143		*Project Assignment #1*
Oct 31 Friday		Introduce & Work on Project Assignment #2	
Nov 3 Monday	How to describe data numerically and visually		
Nov 5 Wednesday	How to decide whether results apply to a population Recommended: T&D p. 154–160, 168–170		
Nov 7 Friday		Lab assignment	*In-Class #8*
Nov 10 Monday	How to decide whether results apply to a population		
Nov 12 Wednesday	How to know whether a relationship or difference exists Recommended: T&D p. 161–165, 167–168		*Project Assignment #2*
Nov 14 Friday		Introduce & Work on Project Assignment #3	
Nov 17 Monday	How to know whether a relationship or difference exists		
Nov 19 Wednesday	How to know whether a relationship or difference exists		
Nov 21 Friday		Work on Project Assignment #3	*Project Assignment #3*
Nov 24 Monday	Exam #2		*Exam #2*
Nov 26 – 30 Thanksgiving Break – No Classes			
Dec 1 Monday	Required meetings with GTA instead of lecture		
Dec 3 Wednesday	Required meetings with GTA instead of lecture		

Monday, Dec 8 (Finals Week)

Required: *Final Project due to Canvas by EOD*

Optional: *In-Person Make-Up Exam*

Note. All readings are recommended, not required. Exams, labs, and project assignments will only evaluate material covered in class. The readings are suggested in case any students would like to learn the material in multiple ways or for students who are frequently absent from class. T&D indicates the Treadwell & Davis text.